

Uncle Dick

I wish I'd known Great-Uncle Dick as a boy
When he boxed and wore knickers on Carpenter Street.
I wish that I once could have seen that rascalion
Who broke a full foot from the measuring stick
That his father, the mason Fritz Heinrich, the builder,
Would use to lay out the stone footings --
So that St. Stephen's Church was built short by 12 inches.
I bet Dick got a licking that time!

I wish I'd known Great-Uncle Dick in his prime,
When he surveyed the beach, the proud life-guard patrolling,
Who could swim to the Crib far off shore, two miles out,
And who pulled people drowning from the river's chill grip
On the day that the Eastland rolled over.

What drew him, I wonder, down under the 'L'
To the smoke of the pool hall on East 63rd? --
A red-knuckled guy in long coat and fedora,
An unlikely doughboy who skipped the Great War
To scabble and scrap in the streets of Chicago?

I wish I'd known Dick when he married young Aura
Before it went bad and the bottle brought ruin,
The evenings grew colder, and longer apart,
Her smooth features blurred in his heroin haze,
As he numbed to her touch,
And it all went to hell in a rush.

Over on Blackstone he ran the speakeasy,
Hanging with gangsters and pimps and the whores,
And that day in the Loop,
When the tommy-gun chattered -
And the man crossing Wabash with Dick was gunned down?
I wish someone had warned him to get out of town,
That he might be a suspect, he might take the fall!

I wish I'd have known him before, long before
The first needle had pierced him and poisoned
His spirit, before the drug raced in his veins
To collapse any hope of redemption.

But back alleys will never be broad boulevards;
Persian-rug parlors and sipping of tea,
Lacy fine curtains and church on a Sunday
Won't do for a man whose blood runs in the street.

I wish I'd known Great-Uncle Dick in a time
Before flop-houses, heroin, squalor and crime.
I wish I'd known Great-Uncle Dick in his prime
Back before he crossed over the line.